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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered to help college-level teachers of sociology develop and implement programs which are consistent with the recent trend toward traditionalism in general higher education--a renewed interest in the traditional disciplines such as history, economics, and language studies. Suggestions center around two teaching methods--critical analysis and debate. These methods are stressed because the author believes that they can be successful in teaching two skills generally considered essential to the modern conception of the ideal core curriculum--communication skills and skills of critical thinking. Specific skills which this re-emergent core curriculum should stress include knowledge of major ideas which characterize civilization at various points, capacity to ask relevant questions about historical and contemporary political and moral issues, aesthetic sensibility, ability and propensity to analyze arguments, competence to communicate orally and in writing, development of an informed self-consciousness, and a desire to continue learning. Ways in which sociology can contribute to both these general and specific aims of liberal education include offering students an opportunity to read and analyze primary sources from divergent intellectual traditions and debate contemporary issues with reference to these primary sources. A course on criminology and deviance, for example, can help students analyze social structures and social institutions, become familiar with a wide variety of primary source material, and debate topics such as gun control and drinking age. The conclusion is that a major way in which teachers of sociology can incorporate traditional concerns such as the history of ideas into the curriculum and still meet student expectations for relevant subject matter is to combine critical analysis of divergent primary sources with student debates on current issues. (DB)

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ADAPTING-SOCIOLOGY TO THE CHANGING DEMANDS OF GENERAL EDUCATION: THE USE OF DEBATE AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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During the nineteen-sixties and early seventies college and university courses were very popular if they were considered to be relevant to the problems of the day. Sociology was in a bull market because it could offer such courses. This stress on relevance, plus a wide use of student electives and fewer undergraduate requirements were largely responsible for the growth of such courses as Social Problems, Race and Minority Relations, Criminology, Social Movements, and a wide variety of other sociology electives. This same situation accounted for reduced enrollments in the traditional disciplines such as history, economics and language studies.

In more recent years, since the middle nineteen-seventies, there has been a renewed interest in traditional general education, or what is often called "core curriculum." (Carnegie Foundation, 1977, Rosovsky, 1978.) With the change to the more traditional perspective it is sociology which must adapt. Traditionally, general education has a strong historical dimension, and, as Bressler has observed, "The overwhelming number of courses in sociology proceed as if the United States exhausts space and the present is the beginning of time." (1967:57) This should not continue to be the case if sociology is to fit into the new curricula.

It is generally understood that this re-emergent core curriculum should teach, among other things, basic communication skills and skills of critical thinking, and it should introduce students to an historical perspective through original sources rather than through the textbook format.

C. Wright Mills has described the ideal graduate of such a program. (Mills, 1963:369-370) I will take the liberty of paraphrasing him here. Such a person would have:

(1) Knowledge of the big ideas, historical and modern, which characterise the civilization
(2) A capacity to ask relevant questions about contemporary political and moral issues, and the familiarity with history which such a capacity presumes
(3) An aesthetic sensibility, i.e., an ability to derive pleasure from creative works.
(4) An ability and a propensity to analyze arguments
(5) The competence to communicate orally and in writing
(6) Development of an informed self-consciousness, and
(7) A desire to continue to learn.

The suggestions that follow are meant to relate sociology to both the specific aims of liberal education and at least the first five of the seven ideal characteristics outlined by Mills. Evaluation of the possible success of these suggestions is left until the end of the paper.

A Sociology Course for General Studies

"The central problems of liberal education emerge not on the level of abstract goals or intentions but rather when one attempts to link these goals to more specific content and formats." (Stauffer, 1980:248)

What follows is a course design which attempts to make that linkage between abstract goals and specific format by means of:

(a) reading of primary sources from divergent intellectual traditions arranged in historical sequence
(b) critical analysis of these sources through lectures, discussion or whatever other teaching techniques seem appropriate, and, most importantly,
(c) student debates which relate these readings to contemporary issues.

In the present case the course content is that of Criminology and Deviance, but the same format could be used with Social Movements, Social Institutions, Stratification, or a wide variety of other courses.

At this point the term "critical" needs clarification. Its more specialized use in the label "Critical Criminology" could be misleading. By critical I mean what Logan meant when he wrote that, "Critical thinking (in the broad sense) refers to getting away from the kind of thinking where we base our beliefs

and opinions on emotion, ideology, fashionable credos, folk wisdom and other such nonrational bases, and form instead the habit of examining ideas for their logical soundness and empirical support." (Logan, 1976:30)

The purpose here also is to develop critical analysis on the level of social structure and social institutions. According to Richard Gelles, who has been associated with the journal Teaching Sociology since its founding and is its current editor, there have been ample suggestions for new teaching approaches on the level of roles or small groups and the need now is for suggestions about how to teach about culture or social structure. (Gelles, 1980:8)

I will next turn to the course content, recalling that this exemplary case concerns Criminology and Deviance but that similar content could be developed in a variety of fields.

The readings of primary sources are in three divergent intellectual traditions which, for the purposes of the course, have been identified as Conservative/Utilitarian, Liberal/Functional, and Critical/Marxist.

The primary sources used to represent the Conservative/Utilitarian tradition are from such authors as Beccaria, Bentham, Wilson, Van den Haag, and Banfield.

The Liberal/Functional school is represented by excerpts from Durkheim, Merton, Cohen, Sutherland, and Cloward and Ohlin.

The Critical/Marxist perspective is contained in excerpts from the work of Marx, Bonger, Vold, Quinney, Turk, and Taylor and his associates.[1]

It is extremely important that the readings be done before the lectures and class discussions. This is not as much a problem here as it is in some other courses because the students know that they must later use the material in debates. Hiller, who has also used debates in undergraduate courses, has observed that, "The lectures take on a new meaning because the students know that they will have to participate in a debate that uses the lecture material as a reference. Interest with understanding is almost guaranteed and the dialectic between the real social world and theory is retained." (1975:131) What Hiller notes about lectures is also true of the readings. The readings used here tend to be on a more abstract, theoretical level than the debates which follow and students have a vested interest in understanding them before entering a debate situation.

There is no reason why small group discussion, tutorials, seminar sessions or other methods could not be used to critically analyze the readings. The important point is that the critical analysis of these competing

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1 Classics of Criminology edited by Joseph E. Jacoby (Oak Park, Ill.: Moore Publishing, 1979) contains a sequence of readings which are very well suited to a course of this type.

ideas takes place. It is also important to resist the temptation to teach students what to think about these readings rather than how to think about them.(See Logan, 1976:41) Some students anticipate that they will eventually be pushed in the direction of Wilson or Quinney or the more traditional functionalists and they watch for cues about what they should "really" think.

Depending upon the size of the class the debates begin at about the mid-term point or soon after. It might be well to intersperse the debates with lectures, discussions or other methods to avoid too heavy a dose of them at one time.

Early on in the course it is very useful to bring in representatives of the college debate team or other experienced debaters to stage a demonstration debate. This should be followed by a class on the adversary method, the logic of debate, the responsibilities of the affirmative and the negative, the meaning of need and plan, and so forth. I have found that members of the college community with experience in debate are usually willing to help out here. Initially, some of the students are bewildered by the rapid delivery of experienced debaters and by what they see as rather complicated procedures. Also, some of them seem to anticipate that debates will be similar to presidential debates that they have seen on television

and this misimpression must be corrected. It is advisable to stay as close as possible to the intercollegiate debate format and to discourage the reading of prepared statements except in the case of the first affirmative speaker. Obviously this poses advantages and disadvantages which will be mentioned presently. However, if the debates do nothing else they at least relate to the ideal characteristics noted earlier by Mills. They require at least attempts at oral communication, the analysis of arguments, and the relating of "big ideas, historical and modern" to "contemporary political and moral issues." Also, the debates make it more difficult to avoid the process of critical thinking. "In practice (the process of critical thinking) is facilitated by having at least two minds who assume adversarial roles. Intellectual conflict (kept distinct from emotional enmity) aids the practice of critical thinking." (Furedy and Furedy, 1979:99)

In addition to the debates written assignments and examinations can be used according to the custom of the instructor and the institution. It is helpful to assign short papers during the course and to schedule a final examination based on a series of essay questions drawn from a list of what the students identify as the important ideas and issues dealt with during the semester.

A few words on the mechanics of course operation are in order. Allowing students to pick their own topics for debate results in such choices as gun control and the drinking age. Neither Marx not Beccaria had much to say on either subject and this makes it difficult to relate the early, more theoretical part of the course to contemporary issues. It is expedient to suggest that debate resolutions be developed around such issues as "Decriminalization", "Radical Non-intervention", "The Therapeutic State", "Punishment" and "The Exclusionary Rule".

It should be made clear to students while they still have the option of dropping the course that they will be required to engage in a debate and that the debate will entail more than the simple reading of a paper. Despite this, much more time must be spent initially discussing the logistics of the course.

Advantages of using debates.

"From the professors point of view the chief advantage of this pedagogical method is that it introduces a novel and interesting format into the classroom without sacrificing theory at the altar of relevance or interest." (Hiller, 1975:129) Also, the technique stimulates discussion at the end of each debate. Four student judges are selected randomly for each debate and they leave the room to discuss their decision. During the

period that "the jury is out" heated discussion is normal.

Such discussion is an important part of the course. One feature of those programs which are returning to the liberal arts model of general studies is that they stress communication skills. This usually means extra emphasis on writing skills and the journals that publish articles on teaching methods are recently full of suggestions on how to teach writing skills. (See recent issues of Teaching Sociology and Improving College and University Teaching for example.) In the course outlined here attempts can be made to develop both oral and written communication skills.

The most important advantage of the course is that it encourages critical thinking about important ideas of the past and present. There has been little empirical research on the ability of sociology courses, or any other courses for that matter, to develop critical thinking. (Logan, 1976 and Gelles, 1980) The findings thus far have been that sociologists have not been successful in teaching students to think critically. At least the debate format encourages such thinking. Whether it succeeds is a question for further empirical research.

Disadvantages of using debates.

Unless care is taken by the instructor to explain

something of the history of ideas a rather cynical, sophomoric attitude can develop on the part of the student. Because sociology is critical and takes the customary and common-sensical only tentatively, students sometimes infer that sociology would subvert their values. (See Goldsmid and Wilson, 1980:143, and Leslie, Larson and Gorman, 1976:4) They may also conclude that because the multitude of divergent ideas they are exposed to cannot be reconciled then learning will be futile.

Minor disadvantages are that teaching the course takes more time than most other courses, the logistics of the course are sometimes difficult to arrange, and the more withdrawn students who did not drop the course initially require careful counseling. Also, the poorer debates can be tedious.

Evaluation

To the best of my knowledge, use of the debate technique as a teaching devise has never been empirically evaluated. Unfortunately this is probably true of the majority of teaching techniques that have been reported on over the past few years. Both Gelles (1980) and Logan (1976) have criticized this lack of empirical evaluation of teaching methods and certainly the criticism applies here.

Thus far I have administered two Likert-type scales which measure attitudes toward due process of law and social order. These allow interesting comparisons between the attitudes of those who have taken this course and

students in a standard Criminology course but they do not measure changes in ability to do critical thinking. I hope, after some fine tuning of the course, to administer measures of critical thinking similar to those used by Logan (1976).

Summary

The technique of combining critical analysis of divergent primary sources with student debates on current issues requires the students to be more attentive to the history of ideas, theory and application of theory than they are in a standard Criminology course taught at the same institution. Largely because of peer pressure and the desire to do well in a debate students do seem willing to move in the direction described by Mills and paraphrased earlier in this paper. They do consider big ideas, historical and modern, they ask relevant questions about contemporary political and moral issues, they analyze arguments communicate orally and in writing, and many of them seem to derive pleasure from their creative efforts. Whether the technique encourages a desire to continue to learn I do not know.

The method is now in need of more rigorous evaluation. Any suggestions about how this evaluation could be carried out would be most welcome.

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